

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 12

THE GUARDIAN (U.S.)
18 March 1981

Developing world

Colombia

Suspected CIA front attacked

A militant wing of Colombia's urban guerrilla April 19 Movement (M-19) executed a U.S. linguist accused of working for the CIA March 7. The linguist, Chester Bitterman, had been kidnapped by M-19 six weeks earlier, during an unsuccessful attempt to capture the local director of the bible translating organization they worked for, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL).

M-19 had offered to spare Bitterman's life on the condition that SIL stop working in Colombia. The institute has 209 employees working among more than a score of indigenous Indian groups. SIL, which is operating in Colombia under a contract with the Bogota government, refused to negotiate with M-19, denying that it had any connection with the CIA.

The latest confrontation between M-19 and SIL is the continuation of a controversy that began in 1962, when SIL first contracted with the Colombian authorities to undertake linguistic studies and propaganda programs among isolated communities that had not been assimilated into the Spanish-speaking culture.

From the beginning, SIL was accused of aiding in the destruction of indigenous cultures and penetrating communities that the Colombian government could not pacify. The criticisms were greatly intensified in 1970 when SIL collaborated in suppressing a guerrilla struggle of the Guahibo Indians by providing the police and army with communications equipment and assistance and propagandizing against the guerrilla fighters.

SIL's work in Colombia is only a small part of their operations, which employ 4000 people in 36 third world countries and in Native American communities in the U.S. The organization was heavily involved in Vietnam before the defeat of U.S. forces there in 1975.

JONATHAN BENNETT